

**THE**  
**GREATEST**  
**INVENTOR**



**E**very morning, Victor was woken by a giant tortoise nibbling on his little toe. The name of the tortoise was Saint Oswald. The name of the village in which Victor lived was Rainwater and it sat at the bottom of a valley, surrounded by three snow-capped mountains and one dark forest.

Together, the boy and his tortoise would run out of the house and race to the top of the smallest mountain. Mostly Victor would win, though Saint Oswald was much faster than others of his kind. They would always arrive at the top just in time to watch the sun rise out of the horizon, wrapping its yellow arms around the hills and breathing warmth into the towns and villages that nestled amongst them.

It was time Victor treasured because it was so quiet, and in that quiet he could be alone with his thoughts. Once the village was awake, quiet was a hard thing to find.

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The days in Rainwater were long and physical. Villagers were busy mending and making, sharing and squawking, dragging ploughs and digging ditches, chasing birds off their crops into the sky. There was always something that needed to be done.

In the warm months, crops were looked after and animals were taken out to graze.

Once the snow had fallen and settled, everyone turned to indoor work: preserving foods, spinning cloth, or making tools and trinkets that could be sold to travelling traders.

For Victor, it always felt like life was something that happened outside of Rainwater. Life happened beyond the mountains and the woods, in sprawling, smoky towns packed with people. Life did not happen in the cow shed, nor on the village green.

‘Don’t you want to go somewhere else?’ he’d ask the other kids, when they’d doze around the great oak on summer afternoons. ‘Somewhere big and strange and full of new people?’

The other kids would wrinkle their noses. ‘What for?’ they’d say. ‘We wouldn’t know anyone and anyway, where would we sleep?’

Victor would sigh and shuffle off with Saint Oswald.

He learned not to share these ideas with his parents either.

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Whenever he did, the response was always the same: ‘Son,’ they’d say, ‘we may work hard here, but we work hard for ourselves, and not to make some rich person even richer. We own our ploughs, we own our land, we own our animals, and there’s very few folk this side of the sea that could say the same.’

Victor didn’t see what was so exciting about owning your own plough. If he had one, he’d have happily sold it for a horse so that he could set off for a grand and bustling city. Or at least he would have done if his parents had let him.

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Our story begins one morning in early spring, with dew still glittering on the fields.

As usual, Victor was woken by Saint Oswald nipping at his feet.

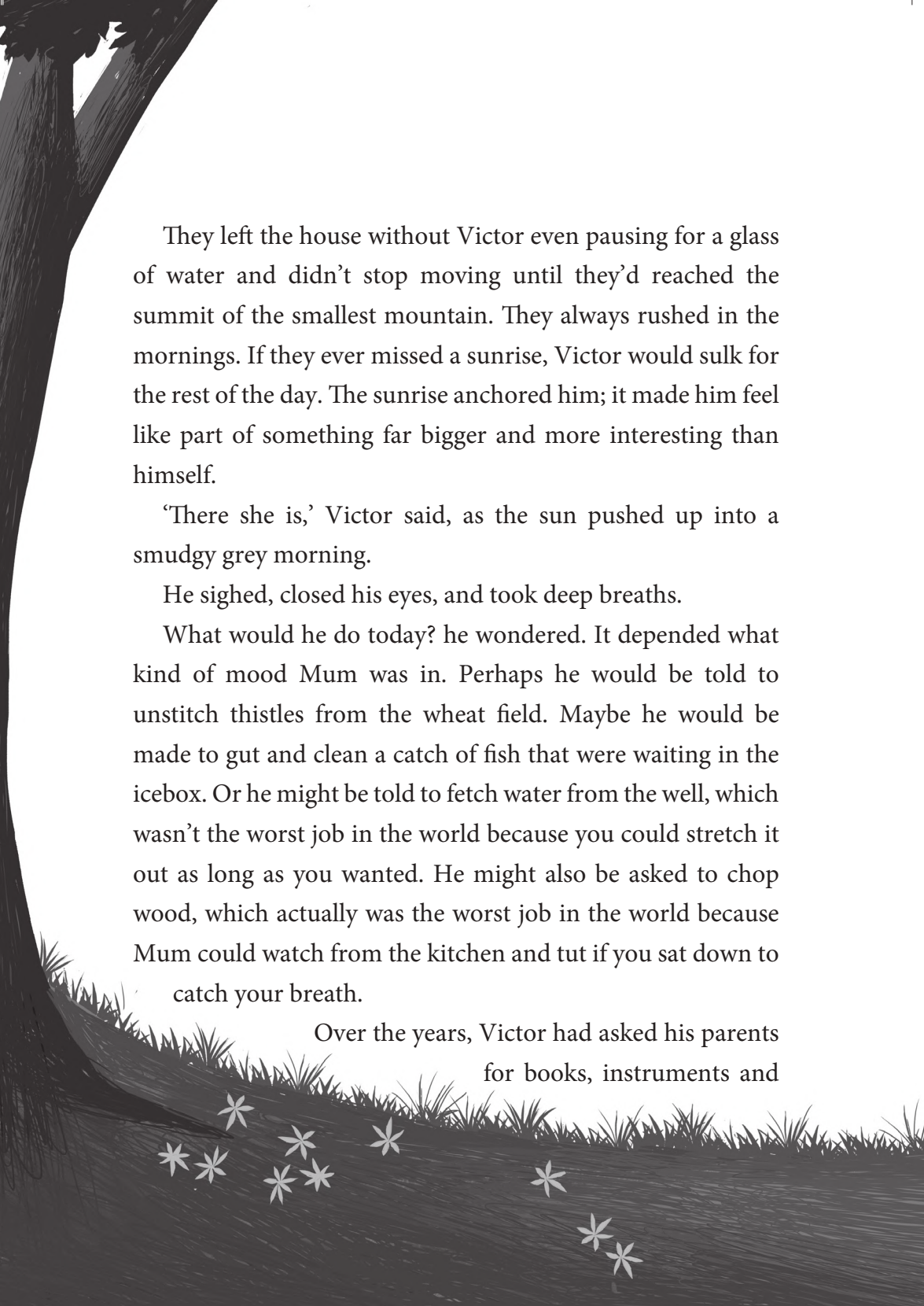
‘Get off, Oz,’ he moaned, kicking out.

‘*Uk, uk,*’ said Saint Oswald.

The tortoise launched itself off the bed.

Half of the time, Saint Oswald landed on his feet and happily scurried through to the kitchen for several breakfast marshmallows. The other half of the time, Saint Oswald landed on his back, and was forced to wait for Victor to get up and turn him over.





They left the house without Victor even pausing for a glass of water and didn't stop moving until they'd reached the summit of the smallest mountain. They always rushed in the mornings. If they ever missed a sunrise, Victor would sulk for the rest of the day. The sunrise anchored him; it made him feel like part of something far bigger and more interesting than himself.

'There she is,' Victor said, as the sun pushed up into a smudgy grey morning.

He sighed, closed his eyes, and took deep breaths.

What would he do today? he wondered. It depended what kind of mood Mum was in. Perhaps he would be told to unstitch thistles from the wheat field. Maybe he would be made to gut and clean a catch of fish that were waiting in the icebox. Or he might be told to fetch water from the well, which wasn't the worst job in the world because you could stretch it out as long as you wanted. He might also be asked to chop wood, which actually was the worst job in the world because Mum could watch from the kitchen and tut if you sat down to catch your breath.

Over the years, Victor had asked his parents  
for books, instruments and

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models. Each time he'd been turned down.

'Will they keep us warm in the winter?' his dad would ask, as though it was the most preposterous suggestion he'd ever heard. 'Can we eat them? Will they help us to bring in the harvest?'

Unless an object had a very clear and practical use, his parents saw no point in them all. It was a view shared by most of the adults in Rainwater. There were no crowded bookshelves in the village, no burnished trumpets, and no boxes of marbles or dominos. There were only tools and other tools to fix them with.

Victor felt a nip at his ankle. The giant tortoise had caught the fabric of Victor's trousers in his beak and was pulling.

'What is it?' he asked impatiently.

Saint Oswald kept tugging on his trousers.

Annoyed, Victor opened his eyes. He glared at his pet tortoise. What was Oz trying to tell him?

And then he saw it.

In the distance, moving down the winding paths cut into the mountainside, was a wooden wagon. It was difficult to make out much detail, but the wagon clearly belonged to a pedlar, rather than a pilgrim or a woodsman.

Pedlars like this only passed through the village once or

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twice a year. They brought with them strange new inventions from the cities, potent medicines, the seeds of newly discovered crops, and indestructible clothes made in factories. Sometimes, for the children, they performed puppet shows or swallowed swords or shared dark stories they'd carried with them from the other edge of the world.

Everyone welcomed the pedlars. They broke up the dull rhythm of life in Rainwater.

'A pedlar's coming!' Victor bellowed, racing down the mountain and skipping through the centre of the village with Saint Oswald on his heels. The people he passed threw up their hands in excitement.

Back at home, Victor found his mum and dad sitting at the kitchen table with steaming mugs of dandelion tea clamped between their hands.

'You've been off up that mountain,' his mum said disapprovingly. 'And I bet you didn't even pause for a glass of water or a bite to eat.'

'Sorry, Mum,' said Victor.

'Fluids!' said Victor's father. 'Fluids are essential for the body. You must always remember to top up your fluids!'